

Veterans Day 2006; Keeping the Promises

“To care for him who shall have borne the battle.”

Abraham Lincoln

Americans may be torn about the wisdom and the prosecution of the war in Iraq, but America speaks in one great chorus of pride about our men and women in uniform; in one heartfelt prayer of thanks for their sacrifice.

Eighty-five years ago, a day was set aside to commemorate the end of another war — “the war to end all wars” — at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918. In 1954, as the seeds of another deadly conflict were being sown in a place called Vietnam, President Dwight Eisenhower signed an Act of Congress officially proclaiming November 11th Veterans Day, to honor all Americans who had served our country in war.

Today, 85 years after the end of the ‘war to end all wars’ and 31 years after the end of the American experience in Vietnam, U.S. men and women are again in combat, but in a different kind of war, not defined so much by battlefields and enemy positions and armored assaults and flanking maneuvers as by house-to-house, door-to-door fighting and roadside bombs. They’re fighting in an insurgent war, and they’re as much at risk in the mess hall or riding in an armored convoy as they are on patrol.

This is not the kind of war that ends with ceremonies and parades and bands playing. It will just be over. Active duty troops will return to their bases and their families. Reservists and National Guard members will go home and try to resume their lives. But, the wounds from this war — physical, mental and spiritual — will be no less serious, no less traumatic and no less terrible than any wound suffered at Belleau Wood, Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima, Chosin Reservoir or the Ia Drang Valley.

Unfortunately, some have felt the need to fill the air with solemn speeches about the nation’s pride and gratitude without feeling the need for substantive follow-through. Promises have been made: “We will never forget their service;” and, “In return for their sacrifice, we will care for their injuries.” Yes, promises have been made, as they have been to every generation of Americans marching off to war.

But, those promises have not been kept. Even as national leaders have been effusive in their praise, they have kept legislation bottled up in Congress to provide the healthcare we promised, and to offer expanded opportunities for higher education so these young men and women can prepare themselves for full partnership in America’s promise.

On January 3, 2007, the 110th Congress will convene in Washington, DC. And, in accord with last Tuesday’s clear and unmistakable statement by American people for a change in direction, the House of Representatives will convene under Democratic leadership. For me, that brings both increased opportunity and increased responsibility. As the voice for

more 117,000 veterans in Hawaii— 63,000 in the First Congressional District alone — my commitment is to fight to see that every veteran who needs healthcare has access to the VA medical system; for an expansion of the Montgomery GI Bill and other college tuition assistance for everyone who meets the active duty requirements, and for full concurrent receipt for military retirees at the earliest possible date. These are some of the major legislative actions I'll be working on to keep America's promises.

It's easy to designate a day for Veterans. Delivering on promises made in their name on such a day is the real test.